BY YVON TAILLANDIER

COROT

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by YVON TAILLANDIER

Corot, the foremost landscape artist of his time, is at last recognized today as one of the greatest painters of the human form, and one of the most moving recorders of intimacy in art. He and his contemporary Delacroix, both of whom worked in the first half of the nineteenth century, share an extraordinary skill in delineating, not merely the contours of objects, but their actual substance, their matter, their luminosity, Corot's deep and universal insight led him to audacious conquests of vision as described by Yvon Taillandier, the author of *The Birth of Modern Painting* and *Voyage of the Eye*, that prefigure contemporary painting. Taillandier guides the reader on a visual voyage across one of the paintings of Corot, and takes him then to a gradual discovery of the body of the artist's work. Along the way, Taillandier reveals the secret and disquieting drama that helped turn this painter, a man of naturally retiring and modest disposition, into a revolutionary artist, a precursor of the art of today.

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BY YVON TAILLANDIER

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Title page: SELF-PORTRAIT, c. 1835
Canvas. Uffizi Gallery, Florence

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The Coliseum Seen from the Farnese Gardens on the Palatine Hill, 1826
Canvas. Louvre Museum, Paris

THE ARBITER

Two people, their heads in shadow and slightly lowered, face each other, seven or eight paces apart and separated by a small trough. The man watching them from behind his easel some twenty yards away, busily wielding his brushes, did not attempt to determine whether or not they were looking at each other. Such uncertainty suited rather than troubled him, and he enjoyed similar uncertainty in the events of his life and also in the emotions they aroused in him. For instance, a few months earlier a girl called Anna had got married, but he never spoke about his suffering, leaving his future biographers to conjecture about it. For himself he preferred to leave the matter vague, like the relationship — if there was one — between this man in shirtsleeves sitting on a stump — perhaps a broken column, perhaps a tree-trunk — and the woman standing with her body slightly arched, leaning against a pile of quarried stone.

Young Girl and Death, c. 1854
Monotype Grassi Collection, Modern Art Gallery, Milan

My curiosity was drawn towards this pile of stones brightly lit by sunlight, and towards a hummock of earth covered with short mauve and green grass which rose directly behind it, when I first closely studied this landscape in the Louvre, entitled *La Cathédrale de Chartres* (p. 29). According to the catalogues it measures 26" × 20", and dates from 1830, an important year in political history but also in the history of art, just because of this picture which the experts judge to be the masterpiece both of the period and of its painter. Seeing it, I understood how, having attained glory through this and other similar marvels, he came to be dubbed ' the divine ', like a Roman Emperor. Something worried me, however. Why, I asked myself, did the divine Corot when painting this cathedral which interested him all the more because of his current enthusiasm for medieval art, let a conical grassy mound like a shadowy screen obscure a part of it? My surprise was all the greater because I knew he was capable of taking great liberties with his subjects, as a well-known anecdote will illustrate:

One day a painter who habitually worked out of doors ' facing his subject ' — in the jargon of a landscape painter — settled himself in the country in front of a clump of trees. After a while a passer-by stopped to scrutinize his picture, shook his head and addressed the artist, remarking that whereas he could recognize the sky and the trees, there was a pool on the canvas which did not appear in the natural scene. The landscape-painter replied tersely, without pausing in his work: " It is behind me ". The passer-by's name has been forgotten, but the painter was, of course, Corot. Now looking at the mound which obstructs one's view of part of the magnificent façade of Chartres Cathedral, every detail of which is precious, one thinks " if Corot was capable of moving a pool surely he could equally well have moved a pile of earth ". But he did not. Why not?

The spectator who was content to remain ignorant about the two figures, who may or may not be looking at each other, in the foreground of the picture which features Chartres Cathedral in the near background, immediately in front of the sky, fled from the revolution which shook Paris in 1830, though he perhaps experienced it more closely than one might suppose. He may even have been a revolutionary himself, in his own way, and from many points of view he may have desired such changes as revolutions promise to bring. As the son of a linen merchant and a fashionable dressmaker, he was not a poor man. Like Cézanne's father, Monsieur Corot gave his son an allowance which enabled him to dedicate himself to painting and to live without too many worries, but he was still not independent. His merchant father despised him for not making money and not being successful. The paintings he sent in to that decisive arbiter of artistic taste, the Salon, were either refused or so badly hung that no-one talked about them, so that without being actually poor he was, and was to remain for a long time, among life's failures.

He was, however, engaged on a masterpiece and was not entirely oblivious to the fact, but at the same time he did not forget his own humiliation nor all those similarly humiliated and humble things like the lowly mound or the insignificant pile of stones. This was undoubtedly one of his motives for reversing the obvious order of things which would

have required the noble and ancient cathedral to appear in the foreground of his picture. Since he failed to secure justice for himself and for others in reality, he readjusted the balance in his imagination by giving more to those who had less. This act of rehabilitation was not without its consequences.

Several years later Courbet appeared on the artistic scene and honoured provincial women in the nude (what a scandal for the Parisians!) and poor workmen breaking stones (what a scandal for the rich!) by painting them, thereby introducing, though of course in another style, the tribute paid by Corot to a mound, at the exact foot of which lay a pile of stones as though ready for the stonebreaker's hammer.

Speaking of these stones, I did not immediately notice that minerals were not only represented in this instance. Long after 1830 Corot, alluding to the blurred landscapes which feature so often in his second artistic period, said " One has to give the mists time to rise ". The Chartres landscape is far from misty, but its excess of light can produce the same results as clouds of mist, in that the eye needs time to accustom itself to it. In this manner I discovered the presence of this poorly dressed woman with the slightly arched body, the direction of whose gaze seemed to have been unimportant to the painter. However at the moment of my little discovery it was not this gap which interested me, but the merging of humanity and stone, a merging which reminded me of the words of Cézanne, born nine years after Corot depicted the play of light on the rectangular prisms of the stones and the woman's shabby clothes, making almost no distinction between them, as though the cloth extinguished the flesh, when he said, transposing the qualities in order to mix the animal and vegetable kingdoms more completely, " Uniting the shoulders of a hill with the slopes of a woman ". Here Corot was uniting mineral and human values, but the result was identical, in that the gulf between the human and the non-human, the animate and the inanimate, shrank and almost vanished in the feeling for democratic equality. This feeling was to develop further in impressionism, with its equality of people and things under the light of heaven, and in the works of Cézanne in which he shows himself very near to Corot's manner. (Corot died in 1875, one year after the first impressionist exhibition, in which two of his pupils, Pissarro and Berthe Morisot, took part.)

Corot's portraits led one of the most penetrating commentators on modern artistic life, Gualtieri di San Lazzaro, to say " They look like terracotta figurines ", in other words, they have the consistency of stone. People have also remarked that Cézanne's figures have ' faces of stone '. This feeling of equality is subsequently affirmed by cubism, in which beings and objects are confused by being reduced to their simple volumes, which method Cézanne had recommended in his famous phrase " treating nature by cube, cone, cylinder and sphere ". In the same way in Corot's Chartres landscape the presence of the mound which intrigued me can be explained by its conical shape. If the cube, or at least the rectangular prism, figures in *L'Enfant au chapeau haut de forme* (*Child in a Tall Hat*, p. 14) as the box on which the child is leaning, while the cylinder appears as the top hat he is wearing, disproportionately elongated by the arc of his left arm which strongly resembles

Recollection of Ostia
Stereotype-plate – Grassi Collection, Modern Art Gallery, Milan

the elongation of the left arm of the *Le jeune homme au gilet rouge* (*The Young Man with Red Waistcoat*) by Cézanne, Corot the dressmaker's son was undoubtedly interested in the cone, among the other figures listed by the master of Aix. The material of women's skirts of his period fell easily into the form of this solid as seen in his portrait of *L'Italienne à la cruche* (*Italian Woman with Pitcher*, p. 21) painted in Italy two years before Chartres, and in that of *Moissonneuse tenant sa faucille* (*The Reaper Holding Her Sickle*, p. 53), painted in 1838 — a shortened cone and a second cone indicated by the inner folds. The portrait of *La Supérieure du couvent des Annonciades de Boulogne-sur-Mer* (*The Mother Superior of the Convent of the Annunciation, Boulogne-sur-Mer*, p. 74) painted 1850–55 and that of *Le Moine*

Girl Wearing Corot's Beret Pencil on Grey Paper Beaux-Arts Museum, Lille

Young Peasant Girl Holding a Child Pencil Drawing Louvre Museum, Paris

Woman Seated with Crossed Arms
Stereotype-plate Louvre Museum, Paris

WOMAN WITH MANDOLIN, 1826-28
Canvas Private Collection, Paris ▷

COROT

Child in a Tall Hat, 1823-24
Canvas Georges Renard Collection, Paris

Well-Dressed
Italian Woman
from Albano
1826-27
Canvas
Private Collection
Switzerland

The Pont-au-change and the Palace of Justice, 1830
Canvas Private Collection, New York

au violoncelle (*Monk with Cello*, p. 75) of 1874 are both wholly in conical form, while in the portrait entitled *La Lecture interrompue* (*The Interrupted Reading*, p. 65, 1865-1870) the cone is only formed by the skirt. Although this cone is cut short at the waist, is yellow instead of green and made of cloth instead of earth, it evokes the mound by the pile of stones to anyone familiar with *Chartres Cathedral*.

While the cathedral in its magnificence has stood for more than six centuries, how long will these stones and this grass remain in their present position? Though the cone and the rectangular prism partake of the immortality of geometry, they are fragile and transitory. Perhaps these stones represent the remains of a demolished house, perhaps, on the contrary,

Cuincy Mill Lithograph

Winter Landscape with Trees Charcoal Louvre Museum, Paris

The Little Shepherd, c. 1856 Monotype Grassi Collection, Modern Art Gallery. Milan

they are the raw materials of a house about to be built, but in any case they will not long remain as they are. They are the ephemeral contrasted with the permanent, and perhaps Corot chose to paint them with this antithesis in mind. He has gathered all beauty into this rubble or raw material, this corpse of a building or its prenatal state, instead of reserving it for the historical monument. He has invoked and varied the light on the sides of these prisms in such a way that they look like the facets of a diamond, which in our day is associated with those jewels which were to appear 78 years later in the facets of cubist paintings. But Corot could not foresee that such a crystalline edifice was to grow out of a mere sketch of a wall. The arrangement of these stones must rather have made him think of the island and bridge of San Bartolomeo in Rome, which he had painted three years before. Between the two arches of the bridge the flat-roofed, solidly geometrical houses also lifted their various facets to the rays of the sun and also formed a kind of diamond, which seems to float above the waters of the Tiber, while the diamond of stones rests on the soil.

One should note however that this sparkling brilliance results from the attention given to it. The world is full of diamonds which one does not see because one is not paying attention, and one is often not paying attention because of one's prejudices. Corot was an example and model of the unprejudiced vision, so exemplary that his lesson is still felt to-day. This mound of earth and these building stones are rubble compared with the completed building which stands behind them.

A short while ago a young painter called Arman decided to paint some bathroom refuse in a closed transparent box. This created a scandal, but after a while one grew accustomed to it and began to find beauty where one had only expected to see the horrors of distortion. One can think what one likes of this enterprise, but in my opinion one must admit that Corot, painting 130 years earlier, counts among the predecessors of the collector of refuse, and that he trod the path of discovery with no less daring and courage.

In any event the discovery of the splendour of a pile of earth and a heap of stones is no isolated phenomenon in the work of the man whom Théophile Gautier called the La Fontaine of painting. Thirteen years after setting his easel on the mound of the Barricades (to-day the Place du Châtelet at Chartres), the La Fontaine of painting, whose entire early career was lit by the Italian sun, was to be in Rome. In a friend's studio he made a young girl from Trastevero lie nude on a white cloth and painted her. It was not his model's beauty which interested him — anyone could appreciate that — but the subtle difference between two zones of almost equal pallor — the colour of the skin and the whiteness of the sheet. Though naturally neither this skin nor this cloth is refuse, their qualities are not noble, and are far removed from the heroes and heroic actions of historical painting, to the lure of which Corot was to yield later, as his ' historic landscapes ' bear witness. Marietta — the name of the young Roman girl — was neither goddess nor heroine of legend, history or romance. She is a texture of skin subtly distinguished against a texture of cloth — two optical qualities with no spiritual content, it seems, and yet they emanate an intense

ITALIAN WOMAN WITH PITCHER, 1826–28 Canvas Previously in the Collection of Paul Jamot, Paris

Rustic Gateway
Canvas Modern Art Gallery, Ca' Pesaro, Venice

Thatched Houses and Mills on the Edge of a Stream, 1831
Canvas Private Collection, Paris

COROT

Seated Woman
with Bare Breast, c. 1835
Canvas
Private Collection, Paris
◁

▷
Study for
"The Toilet"
Black-Lead Drawing
Louvre Museum
Paris

Portrait of a Child Black-Lead Drawing

◁
The Son of Madame Chamouillet
Italian Stone

beauty. Beauty has more secret roots than grandeur or nobility of subject. It is not because the standing woman, shabbily dressed with slightly bent body, blends into the pile of Chartres stones that her outline is less moving. Into this predominantly horizontal heap she introduces a vertical line which lightens yet increases its unity. The brightness of her pale blouse alleviates the gloom of the mound. Her head is lowered, her dark hair long and heavy. Who is she, in fact? A townswoman, perhaps, but certainly not middle-class, for her feet are bare. Is she a poor woman from the slums, a local peasant or a gipsy woman?

Between 1866 and 1870 attacks of gout prevented Corot, then in his sixties, from undertaking his customary frequent journeys through the countryside in search of subjects to paint. He stayed in his Paris studio, executing a series of portraits, or rather paintings of people. Among these characters, who are mostly women, there is one who reminds me of the stone-woman of Chartres, who may be a gipsy. This character belongs appropriately to the group of vagrants, and is entitled *Bohémienne rêveuse* (*Dreaming Gipsy Girl*, p. 83). In fact I do not only associate this gipsy with the woman of Beauce, but with the conical mound as well. Not that her dress is conical like that of so many other women painted by Corot, but that that part of her skirt which shows below her coat or tunic and which is shaped like a quarter segment of a circle and occupies almost a quarter of the total surface of the canvas, has the same characteristic of an opaque screen, incomplete and crudely prosaic, as has the mound at Chartres. In fact it is only prosaic in the context of those prejudices which obscure the true character of things, for in this prosody lies the real poetry of painting.

Things ignored by a casual glance or superficial curiosity are rehabilitated by Corot because they are the means of releasing his pictorial gifts, his exceptional brush technique or his sense of organization. Thus the pile of stones and the cone of Chartres, or the quarter-circle at the base of the figure of the *Dreaming Gipsy*. I have alluded to this white quarter-circle as a part of her skirt, but in fact when I first saw it I took it for a coarse white apron worn over her other clothes. Its position in space is in fact not clear. It seems to be hanging detached from the rest of the figure like a solo passage in a concerto for a moment occupying the whole area of sound while the orchestra is silent, or like the moment in an opera when a singer embarking on a great aria consigns all else to oblivion, or even when a reader of poetry reaches a particularly lovely passage and pauses to listen to the vibrations of the poetry within himself. Yet this is just an approximate geometrical quarter-circle on which the gipsy girl's hand rests like an intruder. As a pictorial interpretation this hand has no special virtue. It is purely realistic, small, plain and anatomically accurate, neither too protruding nor too flat. The white quarter-circle is a different matter, however. Given its position one should be able to sense the shape of the model's knees beneath it. Corot is perfectly capable of conveying this, as for example in the painting of the Mother Superior of the Annunciation, another seated figure, where he gives this impression by means of a broken line and a small fold. One senses the knees in the *Reaper Holding Her Sickle* and

Chartres Cathedral, 1830 Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

Octavie Sennegon (later Madame Chamouillet), 1833
Canvas Private Collection, Paris

PORTRAIT OF MARIE-LOUISE LAURE SENNEGON AS A CHILD, COROT'S NIECE (LATER MADAME BAUDOT), 1831 Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

Florence, View from the Boboli Gardens, 1835-40 Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

Landscape at Tusculum Black Pencil Private Collection, Paris

Study of Trees at Civita Castellana, 1827
Black-Lead Drawing and Pen on Yellow Paper Louvre Museum, Paris

Horseman in a Wood, c. 1854
Black-Lead Drawing Grassi Collection, Modern Art Gallery, Milan

in the figure (p. 13) seated in front of a painting holding a mandolin (a strange subject, by the way). Why did he suddenly forget that he could do this? The quarter-circle beneath which lie these problematic knees is completely flat; the curve shows that there must be joints there, but they are the superficial joints of a puppet.

One might say — this is one possible reason, but only one, for the phenomenon, and equally applicable to the Chartres cone — that this simplification, for such it is, is intended to stress by contrast the complexities of the other parts of the figure — the crumpled blouse in three main colours — yellowy-orange or gold, white and red — the decorated straps, the opening showing a third, shaded garment and embroidery; the head in shadow or at least in a reduced light and crowned with gold and pearls, decorated sleeves and the purplish-blue outer garment, cunningly cut and folded. All at once this quarter-circle of white erupts into the picture — a large expanse of comparative calm, just as the conical mass of the mound which partly obscures the field of vision in the picture of Chartres, contrasting

Charcoal Composition, c. 1865

Forest of Fontainebleau: Le Rageur, 1830-1835
Canvas Previously in the Collection of G. Renard, Paris

The Bridge at Mantes, 1868–70
Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

Venice, Santa Maria della Salute Seen from the Campo Della Carità, 1834
Canvas Mme. Christian Lazard's Collection, Paris

THE CHURCH AT MARISSEL, NEAR BEAUVAIS, 1866 Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

The Bell-Tower of Saint-Nicolas-les-Arras, c. 1870 Lithograph

with the tracery of the cathedral, the massed clouds, the façade pierced by the fourteen windows of a low-built house, the chimneys glinting in the sunlight, the bare walls and the diffused, varied expanses of green, forms a zone of calm and silence, a peaceful area and also a springboard, from which one's eye leaps into a more tortuous topography.

But just as silence following an urgent question is more powerful than a word, these areas of calm are in fact upsetting. The segment at the base of the Bohemian girl's dress becomes so enigmatic when one studies it that one is drawn to reconsider its setting, and notices that the gipsy is seen from above, that the painter's eye is looking down on her and that she is leaning on a balustrade which may well have something in common with the balustrade on which the most famous model of a painter by whom Corot was certainly inspired when he painted another portrait — *La Femme à la Perle* (*The Woman with Pearl*) — was leaning: Leonardo's Gioconda. Not only is the gipsy's face as mysterious as that of the Florentine, for one cannot be sure whether, as Leymarie contends, she is ' unfathomably sad ' or smiling — as in the case of La Gioconda — but also the balustrade breaks off suddenly, releasing a shower of questions.

To return to Corot's attacks of gout, which forced him to remain in his studio, painting mostly figures of the type to which the gipsy girl belongs, he said that the birds came to sing to him and that he gathered nuts there — in other words, that he invented the landscape he could not see. Perhaps he meant to paint a garden, trees and streams beyond his balcony. Perhaps he did even paint, and then destroy, them. It is remarkable that this essentially landscape artist created no scenery as background for his *Woman with Pearl*, as Leonardo created for his *Mona Lisa*, whose influence is clearly seen in Corot's painting. Perhaps he felt that Leonardo's scenery looked more woven or painted than real, and therefore he omitted it just because he was a landscape artist and it seemed to him too unrealistic. In that case, why the balustrade, what view does it overlook and what kind of realism is this, with a garden balustrade inside a studio? If it had been brought in for a purpose, why does it break off so suddenly? It is there for the gipsy girl to rest her elbow on, and this function completed, that is, once it reaches the girl's back, it comes to a stop, like in a dream when things appear as the irrational narrative needs them and vanish when they have no further use. This is the beginning of the realm of the dream, of unreality, even of surrealism. However the white segment restores concrete, balanced values where the impossible is becoming possible, yet where there is a risk of everything sliding into the realm of the ethereal and the unreal.

One often thinks of Vermeer in connection with Corot because of the magical quality of light and a kind of silence which their works have in common. Germain Bazin has even wondered whether, when he went to Holland in 1854, Corot saw some works by the Delft painter, whose richness and genius had at that time not yet been rediscovered. Several of Vermeer's pictures lend themselves to such comparison, especially a portrait in which he also portrayed himself in the act of painting, with his back to the spectator. If this shows modesty, Corot is even more modest, because he does not paint himself painting the gipsy

Sketch Made
e Theatre for
" The Dance
he Nymphs"

Nude Woman Lying on Her Left Side Black Stone Louvre Museum, Paris

MARIETTA "ROMAN ODALISQUE", 1843 Canvas Beaux-Arts Museum of the City of Paris

Nevinitza — Femme
COROT

Diana Bathing
1873-74
Canvas
Pushkin Museum
Moscow

THE TOILET, 1859
Canvas
Private Collection, Paris

Reclining Nymph, c. 1855 Canvas Geneva Museum

girl, but in fact reveals something even more precious and personal — the movement of his hand with the brush, which one can follow as it passes to and fro, progressing or caressing. This is a stronger, more impressive and more consistent realism than all the rest. This is the moment of truth at its sublimest. If St. Thomas Aquinas was right in saying that beauty is the splendour of truth, we are looking at beauty made splendid by the proximity of falsehood and lies. We know that this is no real gispy, but a model dressed up to look like one; the balustrade is certainly fictitious. These are image, imitation, facsimile, pretence, while the brush-strokes on the white segment of her skirt are real brush-strokes, real imprints. Thus the act of painting becomes interesting in itself; the painter does not deserve to be noticed because of what he paints, but because he paints. This heralds a certain aspect of abstract painting, and Germain Bazin in the introduction to the 1962 exhibition of Corot paintings in the Louvre wrote that in such pictures he heralded " experiments with the brush which were to become fact for the modern generat on ".
Corot was to pay heavily for his success in rehabilitating the act of painting and in heralding not only abstract art but epic art as well.

ORPHEAN LONELINESS

The plaintive words of the despairing aria which Gluck (one of Corot's favourite musicians) gives to his Orpheus — " I have lost my Eurydice — nought can match my grief " — come to mind when in my attempt to understand the high price which his bolder achievements cost him I returned to the view of Chartres with the two figures in the foreground. Why do they seem so separate? Seven or eight paces are little enough, and a few monochrome centimeters on a canvas are no great distance.
The 34-year-old Corot, who from the mound of the Barricades painted these few centimetres, the pile of stones and the conical mound projected by a bank of which only the beginning was visible, made a sacrifice. Although he was a devout Christian and when he became rich gave part of his fortune to religious institutions to help the poor, he was happy to obscure a part of a superb monument which bore witness to his own faith, thereby even disfiguring it. In the aesthetic sense he was also making a sacrifice as an ardent admirer of medieval art, when he decided to conceal a part of the church whose virtues he knew well from his detailed study of it and the many sketches he had already made. That which he takes away from both the cathedral and himself is returned to him in the play of light which he thus achieves and the effect, subtlety and variations of which were of vital importance to him. Before the end of his life Corot was regarded as the greatest landscapist of his day, though not until he had suffered much criticism, reservations and set-backs. To-day however, having discovered the painter of figures in him, it is a more abstract quality of technique which constitutes his importance in our eyes, whereas most of his contemporaries

knew nothing of this side of his work, because he kept his figure paintings shut up in the studio. Ingres, who was sixteen years older than Corot, is to us the master of drawing, Delacroix, a year younger, the master of colour, and Corot we see as the master of values, that is as having the most skilled eye to discern the delicate variations of light and shade, as for instance the skin of Marietta and the whiteness of the sheet; the clear childlike face of Octavie Sennegon (p. 30) and her lace-collar; the white bodice of Agostina (p. 82) and the brightness of her breast; the shine of the rocks and the bodice of the shepherdess sitting a little way from the tree or couple of trees nicknamed "Le Rageur" ("The Angry One") — actually *Forêt de Fontainebleau*, p. 37; the whiteness of the clouds and the whiteness of the shoulder of the *Reaper Holding Her Sickle;* the pink of the bricks of *Le Portail Rus tique* (*The Rustic Gateway*, p. 22), the light green of the fields, the ivory of a line of cement; the breasts of *Femme assise, la poitrine découverte* (*Seated Woman with Bare Breast*, p. 24) and the material which clothes her stomach and legs; the gipsy — if she is a gipsy — and the stones she leans against, the luminous landscape which lies between her and the sitting or squatting man and the slightly brighter luminosity of his sleeve. Why does the man on the tree-stump or broken column look so lonely?

There are other people not far away; up a nearby road a waggon is climbing or turning and a child is walking towards it. On the slope one can distinguish the minute figures os a man and a woman either passing each other or talking together. None of them seemf as lonely as that one man, and his solitude is all the more striking because, like most of Corot's landscapes, this one seems friendly. In fact the opinion of Corot most frequently expressed by modern painters — particularly figurative painters ilke Pignon and abstract painters like Poliakoff or Schneider — is that he was an intimist, which is surprising when it refers to a landscape painter and besides is hardly compatible with the idea of solitude. Intimacy implies proximity, like that between one wall and another in a small room where all the contents keep one company. Landscape however implies great spaces and the possibility — even probability — of isolation. Thus for Corot to be landscapist and intimist, painter of solitude and of togetherness he had to be a valorist — one who can discover connections and relationships, and ways of blending the near and the far, in easy and in difficult circumstances.

For the valorist observer who stood on the mound of the Barricades, Chartres provided a good opportunity, for it contains no great contrasting values which might irrevocably eliminate a part of the view, yet the elements of the scene are sufficiently distinct to make one alert. Even the juxtaposition of horizontal and vertical lines is worthy of attention. The pile of stones seems spread out at the foot of the conical grassy mound with its rising lines, so that their forms and position are contrasted. At a little distance, in the background of the picture, a low house sprawls beside a road and these flat lines contrast with the vertical surge of the two towers and the façade of the cathedral. So the sitting or crouching man in shirt-sleeves is contrasted with the position of the standing woman — a lonely man whose isolation seems reflected by the landscape.

Nude Standing
Pencil Drawing
Louvre Museum, Paris

Corot the valorist intervenes; for such isolation to contaminate the world would be too frightful, and to prevent this he lights the pile of stones — or observes their light — as he lights — or observes the light on — the low house by the road. These two illuminations, like the two jaws of a vice, grasp the pile of earth, tighten their hold and compress it. The awesomely great distance is reduced and even the dusk or half-light of the transept, the nave and of a large part of the cathedral are caught as in a vice between the light of the low house and the luminous colouring of the romanesque clocktower.

Corot did not always find things so easy. Certain events in his life led him to observe or to recreate nature in such a manner that his need for intimism and proximity was hedged about with obstacles and problems. Though Degas called him a pipe-smoking angel, his biographers acknowledged that he was no stranger to mortal anguish and sorrow. Like other men, he could smoke a pipe and had a father and mother who were not immortal. Corot was 51 years old when his father died in 1847, and when his mother died four years later he wrote in his diary, " Feelings alone should guide you. Reality is a part of art and feelings complete it ". What feelings? As Jean Leymarie observed, the titles of his pictures alone can show us, titles like *Souvenir de Mortefontaine* (*Recollection of Mortefontaine*, p. 67), *Souvenir d'Italie : Castelgandolfo* (*Recollection of Italy : Castelgandolfo*, p. 63), *Diane au bain* (*Diana Bathing*, p. 46), *Une Matinée. La Danse des Nymphes* (*One Morning. The Dance of the Nymphs*, p. 66). These indicate a feeling of distance, as the world retreats into the mists of mythology or of memory. Corot is left alone and detached, and to express his solitude and detachment this delicate valorist had to have recourse — at least in a part of his works at that time — to the grandiose media of the chiaroscuro. Inspired by Claude Lorrain, he implemented a style related to Chinese shading, consisting of dark shapes on a light ground, which symbolize earthly forms intensified by the shadow of death. Being a religious man, to him the sky was a source of light. These two masses confront each other like a battle between giants. This time Corot yielded to the temptation to universalize the problem of solitude. But does he in fact really yield to it? Is the sky so irrevocably distant? Has the earth become its irreconcilable enemy? Has he renounced its familiarity? His moral condition was so deceptive that beneath the mask of a happy, gay, benevolent character his friends discovered the face of melancholy. The intimist in him struggled on, refusing to allow unbridgeable gulfs to take control. Large shady areas dispute with large light areas for control of his canvases. This may be, but the intimist is not without cunning, and his ingenuity invents or recreates countless tricks — four at least — to prevent these warring elements from clashing, and even to make them coexist as though they were homogeneous.

The passer-by who asked Corot where was the water which appeared only on his canvas and who heard him reply, " It is behind me " learned that day one of those tricks which the Anacreon of the countryside (as he was often called) employed to prolong celestial clarity in earthly shadows or twilight. The pond in *L'étang de Ville d'Avray* (*The Pond at Ville d'Avray*, p. 73) is another example, for it is at once a mirror of the sky and a sort of enclave which breaks and weakens the darkness of the bank, the hills and the copse.

Reaper Holding Her Sickle, Her Head Resting on Her Hand, 1838
Canvas Mr. William A. Coolidge's Collection, Cambridge, Mass.

Mother and Child on the Beach, 1860-70
Canvas John C. Johnson's Collection, Philadelphia

Portrait of Louis Robert, 1843-44
Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

WOMAN WITH YELLOW FLOWER Canvas Grassi Collection, Gallery of Modern Art, Milan

Portrait of Jeannette Pencil Drawing and Watercolour Beaux-Arts Museum, Basle

Breaking up the shadows was not enough to mitigate contrasts and soften the chiaroscuro as much as the inventor of water-mirrors wished, and for this purpose he used another method which Vermeer and Chardin had both used before him. One sees it clearly in Vermeer's *La Vue de Delft* (*View of Delft*) provided one approaches it and studies the houses with their backs to the light, the façades of which stand out black against the sky. These façades shimmer with a myriad points of light which seem to have dropped from the sky into the urban half-light. Diderot noticed these same points of light in Chardin's work and one cannot help noticing them in Corot's. In the Chartres painting he had already multiplied the fragments of masonry which could reflect light in order to dissipate not a shadow but a half-light on the left of the cathedral. When he wanted to bite into darkness he used luminous corrosive elements, but these particles of powdered light are always jus-

tified figuratively. They are little wild flowers as in the grove where the nymphs dance, new leaves, new springs, buds on the ends of branches, the gaps between the branches or the holes among the foliage. In *Diana Bathing* they take the form of a rain of petals. Corot's air is never pure, but always full of sunlit specks of dust.

Next comes his third way of softening contrasts. In his *Panorama des Arts* (*Panorama of the Arts*, 1947) Marcel Zohar wrote: " With the coming of Corot new accents were born... The ' tiny foliage ' of trees became masses of colour ". In fact Corot was not satisfied with evoking trees in masses, but for the processes started by his predecessors to give the illusion that the image of a tree might well comprise the image of each of its leaves he substituted others. A Corot tree — at least those growing in his paintings after 1850 — is spongy, fringed, flannelly, drinking in whiteness like blotting-paper, stuffing, gauze or muslin. By infinitely subtle degrees the vegetable dissolves into the ethereal, so that one no longer knows where light begins and shadow ends.

His fourth method of blending light and shade and reducing contrasts is his treatment of the sky, which is neither harshly white nor aggresively blue but of a gentle grey — Corot's greys are famous — softly gleaming, familiar and intimate. This is the intimist's most spectacular triumph — to achieve intimacy with the visible and the spiritual heavens. A few hours before his death he had a presentiment of its coming and imagined what he would do in a heaven which seemed a familiar, friendly place. " To-day " he said to his faithful housekeeper, as though he was telling her not to prepare a meal unnecessarily, because one of his many friends had invited him to dinner, " to-day Father Corot will be dining up there ". So he was reconciled with heaven, but in spite of the great affection his goodness and gaiety won for him, was he reconciled with the earth?

Six or seven years before his death, while Monet, Renoir and Pissarro were realizing the first impressionist paintings, he was at Mantes-la-Jolie, on the escarpment of the Seine, painting what was later to be considered the masterpiece of his second period. It is not a chiaroscuro painting, because Corot only applied this technique to a part of his work after 1850, and he delighted in painting a quantity of canvases with no question of shadows, where day so vanquishes night that one forgets the inevitability of its coming. Examples are *Le Beffroi de Douai* (*The Belfry at Douai*, 1871), *L'Intérieur de la Cathédrale de Sens* (*Interior of Sens Cathedral*, p. 84, 1874) and *Le Pont de Mantes* (*The Bridge at Mantes*, p. 38) which in fact depicts two bridges, one partly obscuring the other, two houses, the Seine, a hill in the background sloping down from right to left, the bank which slopes from left to right, four bare or almost bare trees, a stump and a boat containing a man in a red cap. This man is doubly alone, firstly because he is the only person in the whole scene and secondly because the red of his cap is the only red of its kind in the picture. " In a painting ", said Corot, " there must be one single point of light, unique in its intensity ". In other words, a star of a light, colour and intensity which belong to it alone. In the Chartres painting it is the sleeve of the sitting or crouching man. Besides, between these two pictures, painted 40 years apart but united by the fact that they are respectively the masterpieces of his

Roman Landscape Louvre Museum, Paris

60 *Study of a Woman Pencil Private Collection*

YOUNG GIRL AT HER TOILET, 1860-65 Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

The Gust of Wind
Canvas Grassi Collection, Gallery of Modern Art, Milan

Recollection of Italy: Castelgandolfo, c. 1865
Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

THE STUDIO, 1868–70 Canvas Mr. and Mrs. William S. Paley's Collection, New York

THE INTERRUPTED READING, 1865-70 Canvas Art Institute, Chicago

One Morning. The Dance of the Nymphs, c. 1850
Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

Recollection of Mortefontaine, 1864
Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

PORTRAIT OF MADAME CHARMOIS, c. 1845 Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

Self Portrait, 1858 Monotype

two different periods, there are many similarities. Of the two houses in the Mantes painting one is long and low, the other tall and narrow, while in *Chartres* the cathedral rises vertically and a single house stretches out long and low. At the top of the conical grassy mound and on the crest of the slope which extends it to the right, two trees growing side by side occupy almost as much space as the bell-towers. While one of these trees stands slim and straight as a spear, the other has thick and twisted foliage. One of the trees in the centre of *Mantes* is similarly dense and the other is similarly, or almost similarly, geometrical. The comparisons can be carried further but for the moment it is enough to note that both pictures contain a lonely figure and a symbol of castration — the stump of tree or pillar on which the man in shirt-sleeves is sitting or squatting, and the stump which can be seen on the river-bank beyond which is the boat of the red-hatted man.

Leymarie thought the red-hatted boatman was a projection of Corot himself; I agree, and even think the same applies to the man in shirtsleeves. Why did he seem so completely alone?

When the son of the draper and the dressmaker painted this sitting or crouching peasant in which he saw himself, without admitting it openly, he was suffering emotionally as the result of the marriage of one of his mother's seamstresses, Anna, to whom I have already alluded. In the letter he wrote about this event, which André Coquis has found, he admitted that he could never be a good husband. His biographers have hastened to add that obviously a landscapist, who is perpetually in the hills and valleys and hardly ever at home, could not be a good husband, but perhaps the motive for Corot's solitude goes deeper and partly explains the profoundly human element in his art.

When the foremost landscapist of his time, who was also one of the greatest valorists and most moving intimists of *all* time, was awarded the Legion of Honour, his father thought there had been a mistake in Christian name, and that this honour was intended for himself, a prosperous merchant and member of the National Guard, and not for his good-for-nothing son, who could not even earn enough money to buy his paints.

One day Corot entered the dining-room of his parents' house. Dinner had already started and his shoes bore traces of a country walk. His father was furious and rebuked him violently, despite the fact that he was already a man of 50. When telling the story later, Corot added: " I said nothing. For a long time I had been modelling myself on Christ ", but however pious was the man they called the St. Francis of Assisi of painting, he probably only *seemed* to forgive those who offended him and subconsciously continued to hate the offender. From there to wanting to castrate him — to use the language of the psychoanalyst — is no great distance, and we find an illustration of this desire, which needs a sharp instrument for its realization, in the *Reaper Holding Her Sickle*, whose face, according to Jean Leymarie, resembled that of Corot.

The man who wants to castrate his father castrates himself; hence the frequent recurrence of castration symbols in his works, such as the truncated tree-stump in the foreground of *Castelgandolfo*, the broken pillar in *Chartres* and the stump or stripped tree-trunk in *Mantes*.

Woman with Child, c. 1871
Monotype Grassi Collection, Modern Art Gallery, Milan

In the two latter cases the symbols can be associated with the image of the lonely figure in which he projects himself. This does not however mean that Corot was impotent, as is proved by his life-story, but one can assume that that aspect of sexual potency represented by marriage was not his. His father repeated often enough for his son to be obsessed with this idea until his old age, that he himself had the social right to exist, while his son had not. Hence there follows at once the impossibility of marriage as one sees it described in *Chartres*. The man in shirt-sleeves is depicted as squatting or as legless, another symbol of castration, since in this position it is difficult or indeed impossible for him to reach the woman some seven or eight paces away. She is leaning on a pile of stones which could symbolize a house either destroyed or perpetually unbuilt. Marriage, hearth, house are all excluded, because social marriage, that is, in the conception of this fervent catholic who went to church every Sunday, Christian marriage, must be excluded. It is symbolized by the presence of the romanesque-gothic cathedral, but with its doors barred by a series of low buildings and the famous mound which I found so intriguing.

Another result of Corot's social castration was his refusal to exhibit his figure paintings, with perhaps one exception. Painting figures, even nude ones, means painting social beings and participating in social life, the life of his father, not his. He could only be a secret portraitist, but paradoxically this secretiveness increased his freedom. These paintings — except one exhibited in 1869, *La Liseuse dans la Campagne* (*Girl Reading in the Country*) — are not gallery paintings. They are not to be exposed to criticism. He painted exactly as he wanted, even that prophetic white segment in the *Dreaming Gipsy Girl* in which the accidental brush-marks herald Messagier's non-figurative painting, but which one cannot help thinking was painted at great personal cost.

SUBLIMATION

The Orpheus with no Eurydice, and even less blessed than the son of Calliope and the King of Thrace, because he had no wife, this celibate excluded by his father's continual scorn from the place he might have occupied in formal society, dreamed perpetually of marriage. Cézanne said he was content to marry " the shoulders of a hill to the slopes of a woman ", but it was not so. Everything served as a pretext for him to depict the connections between people and to arrange his visual images so that they seem to glide towards each other in poetic union. " Monsieur Corot is a poet ", said most contemporary critics to demonstrate their approval. As a poet, even among his romantic contemporaries, though not the classical and antique poets to whom he is compared, he consciously but definitely enjoyed this partial impotence from which he suffered, against which he revolted in his imagination and which in fact he admitted, although this revolt manifested itself indirectly, and even just where all freedom should be allowed. From Kleist — to take a name at

THE POND AT VILLE D'AVRAY, 1865-70 Canvas Pushkin Museum, Moscow

The Mother Superior of the Convent of the Annunciation Boulogne-sur-Mer
1850–1855
Canvas
Louvre Museum
Paris

Monk with Cello, 1874 Canvas Kunsthalle, Hamburg

Cart at the Ford of the Great Tree, 1865-70 Canvas Pushkin Museum, Moscow

The Dreamer, c. 1854 Monotype Grassi Collection, Modern Art Gallery, Milan

random — to Kierkegaard and Kafka, impossible or forbidden love is one of the themes of romanticism and one of its consequences. But as a poet for all time, and not just a romantic, he possessed this basic faculty for comparison, metaphor and association by which a great poet becomes a great match-maker.

After painting *Chartres* he was to be found between 1830 and 1835 in the Forest of Fontainebleau. " With the stump of a tree ", Monet was to say later, admiringly, " Corot expresses everything. " Here he painted a tree in a windy clearing, a tree well-known by the peasants who called it " Le Rageur ". In fact it is two trees which have grown together, the larger one straight and the smaller more bent. The theme of the pair, in which one is larger or more simple and the other smaller, thinner or more twisted, can

Study of Trees Pencil Drawing and Pen Louvre Museum, Paris

Recollection of Tuscany, 1845 Etching

often be found in Corot's world, but more frequently in vegetable or mineral form, as though the creator of the place wanted to remind himself and even perhaps the spectators that this sort of union was only possible for him in nature and not in the legal sense. The dual idea of law and nature may well have been expressed in *Chartres* in the language of earth, trees and stones. The mound and the pile of stones might well be Corot's life, lived more or less on the brink of society, a life still in the building, incomplete and thus contrasting with the completed cathedral. The two trees which balance the bell-towers, one straight and the other bent, might well be male and female, as even might the two towers, one in lacey gothic and the other in austere romanesque. The juxtaposition of these two pairs is the juxtaposition of the social couple of towers with the natural or vegetable couple growing out of the pile of earth.

Let us return to " Le Rageur ", to the two trees united against the threat of the lowering, whitish-grey, swelling sky. Below their trunks, two rocks jut out of the ground, one larger than the other, forming yet another couple. This pair of rocks is joined to the pair

of trees by a line which extends and completes them, marrying vegetable and mineral, while three other rocks, forming a capital Y echoed by the branches of the trees, repeat this union. Below them and on the rocks is seated a shepherdess, her right shoulder bunched as she leans on her staff. The rocks are swollen in the same way, as Corot marries their shoulders with the curve of the girl's body. There are still more weddings, for the clouds resemble the shoulders of the rocks and the rocks look like clouds among the grass. At first glance this picture seemed to me rather uncouth, but subsequently I let myself be captivated by the series and the poetry of Corot's marriages. He did not only marry earth and sky and all realms, even the social with the natural as in Chartres, for instance, but everything, or almost everything, even the most violently opposed elements one can imagine, so that he reached the point of giving a landscape the intimacy of a still life, of which we only know one by his hand (p. 81), for seemingly he felt no need to paint this type of picture.

" Monsieur Corot does not finish his pictures... Monsieur Corot is incomplete... Monsieur Corot is a stammerer... Monsieur Corot is careless... Monsieur Corot is a poet who could be a painter if he troubled. " These recurrent themes of contemporary critics, even at the moment of his greatest glory, provoked a superb response from the great match-maker. In a picture called *L'Atelier* (*The Studio*, p. 64), which is noteworthy for its great precision, we see a woman seated, holding a mandolin as though testifying to the painter Orpheus's taste for music. Her voluminous pink dress is an exact polygon, with certain folds forming right-angles which give poise and solidity to the composition and determine it with finality. This impression of limitation and solidity is reinforced by many details in the background which repeat the right-angle — an empty picture-moulding and a join in the wall, this same moulding and the stovepipe, and even the shape of the stovepipe itself, with its two visible perpendicular sections, repeats it once again. The insistence on this angle is so evident (it is to be found in other works of his, notably in the very centre of *Chartres*) that I am tempted to see in Corot the precursor of that master of the perpendicular, the early Dutch abstract painter, Piet Mondrian. The importance accorded to geometrical composition makes the picture an enclosed, well-defined entity, with no way out. But is this actually so? We have not yet completed our inventory. In fact this picture contains another picture, like Courbet's *L'Atelier* (*The Studio*), in which one sees the master of Ornans painting a landscape. In Corot's work the landscape to which the mandolin-player's left hand points — she holds her mandolin in her right — is certainly, in spite of its open appearance, a closed landscape. It consists of a path between two trees and a hill. Behind the hill one can imagine a house containing a studio where sits a mandolin-player with her left hand on an easel, on which is set a canvas portraying two trees and a hill, behind which is a house containing a studio where sits a mandolin-player with her left hand on an easel, on which is set a canvas, and so on, and so on.

This idea leads one to imagine how Corot replied to a man who agreed with the critics and who pointed out that several of the small figures with which his landscapes were pop-

Bouquet of Flowers in a Vase Beside a Tobacco Jar, 1874
Canvas Mr. and Mrs. Eliot Hodgkin's Collection, London

AGOSTINA, c. 1866 Canvas Gallery of Art, Washington, D.C.

Dreaming Gipsy Girl, 1865-70 Canvas Private Collection, Paris

THE CATHEDRAL OF SENS (INTERIOR, THE LOWER RIGHT SIDE), 1874
Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

ulated were noseless, mouthless and eyeless. A man who, had he seen *Marietta* (p. 45) would have noticed at once that her feet are barely sketched in; who if he could have seen *Femme à la Fleur Jaune* (*Woman with Yellow Flower*, p. 56) would have condemned it because most of her is wreathed in a sort of mist. A man who would have admitted with chagrin that it was impossible to tell whether or not the man sitting on a broken column at Chartres was wearing a beret, or whether the ground between him and the woman was a path, or just ground.

This man, having read the adverse criticisms of Corot's clumsy draughtsmanship, impure lines, awkwardness and apparent satisfaction with unfinished sketches, asked him: " Monsieur Corot, why do you not finish your pictures? " The pipe-smoking angel replied: " Well now, Monsieur, what do you do with infinity? ", thereby conforming to the Kantian definition. By marrying the finite and the infinite he was marrying the most opposed poles, so that any other marriage became possible and even easy except one: his own.

This impossibility which on the one hand made him such a wonderful intermediary between apparently irreconciliable elements, on the other hand introduced a kind of reserve into his behaviour and a certain furtiveness into his unifying activities. He dreamed of marriage but never got married; that part of his destiny had to remain a dream, and this is why he was neither a colourist like Delacroix nor a draughtsman in the way Ingres was able to be.

As Ingres had not Corot's complexes he could divide one shape from the next by a sharp line like a swordcut. Corot could not, for this would have mean evoking unbearably that castration of which he was at once victim and by desire inflictor, because clear sharp outlines among other things can be said to represent castration. Shut out from the world of marriage, he should have sought his compensation in the sensual world of colours. However he could not, for this would have meant admitting that he enjoyed pleasures of a kind which his religion condemned. Colour he certainly used often enough; it glows softly with lovely yellows, blues, oranges and greens acting as background to splendid reds like in *La Jeune lectrice* (*Young Girl Reading*, Front Cover), but he suppressed or moderated it, never letting its elements clash with a violence that could make them sparkle and burn; above all he never let them proliferate. (" I am afraid of the hubbub of colours ", he admitted.) The range of his palette is therefore quite restrained, yet a colourism such as that of Delacroix, for instance, or of the impressionists, his successors, would have given him countless opportunities for marriages. This again would have been impossible, however, for he did not want such a technique; it would have denied his partial castration, and his psychological honesty rejected the lie. So he was led to adopt the middle road of valorism.

A valorist does not need to concern himself with contours, for he defines objects by their light-value and not by their silhouette or profile, as a colourist defines them by their colour. So colourists and valorists share this partial or total unconcern for the contours of things, which belong to the draughtsman's field, and are only interested in their substance, which

satisfies sensuality. If however the substance is forcefully coloured, as the colourists wish, it asserts this sensuality, while the valorists, expressing substance by means of variations of light, only betray sensuality in a veiled manner, as though with a murmur or a whisper. This method exactly suited Corot.

Having taken these precautions, the Orpheus without a Eurydice can dream of and extol innumerable marriages, for there are a thousand ways in which he can develop this theme. One is to use related light values, that is, of approximately equivalent intensity, which serves to unify forms. Thus the left arm of the reading girl in *The Interrupted Reading*, which stands out, or rather hardly stands out, from a ground which is almost as white; thus her right arm which is as pale as her skirt, from the folds of which it is hardly distinguishable. Thus the Swiss red of Sens Cathedral (p. 84), which is lucky to be red because otherwise it would be lost in the yellow earth which is as light as itself. Thus the *Seated Woman with Bare Breast*, whose skin blends into the cloth.

Corot carried notebooks about with him, to make sketches when he was out walking, adding to the sketches figures to indicate the exact degree of luminosity of the various parts of the scene. Thus the gradual progressions of light, progressions of such gentleness and delicacy that he could give even them a feeling of intimacy. But with all this tenderness and proximity he risked being led into dissolution of form. " Monsieur Corot produces indefinite works... Monsieur Corot's pliable style is regrettable. " These are unfair judgments, but they are significant. Another of his great contemporaries, Turner, and his successors the impressionists did not resist the temptation to dissolve forms in their search for harmony. But in spite of his famous mists and twilights, in his greatest works Corot resisted this temptation throughout his career. Why?

To find the answer one must follow his advice to let the mists rise and reveal another facet of his psychological state. Oppressed by his father, whom he rejected subconsciously, he fled for refuge to his mother, which clearly explains his choice of landscape-painting, as this is (according to Freud in his " Introduction to Psychoanalysis ") a maternal symbol. His relationship to his landscapes is that of a child, or even an embryo, a foetus in the womb. This is why the man in a red cap in the Mantes painting is in a boat, because the boat represents in concentrated form the symbolism of the womb, which is in fact the significance of the whole scene. Another sign of his regressive psychological condition — a condition which in some circumstances is favourable to creation — is his childlike gaiety and that naïvety which his contemporaries liked to find in him and in his works.

These conditions should lead the painter to a dissolution and confusion of form, since the prenatal state is a kind of confusion, because the child is merged with the mother. This is in fact one aspect of Corot's style — that aspect which led Baudelaire to write " Corot is a harmonist ". Another aspect is that which stirs the dark surface under the cushion in *Marietta* and the long dark streak in *Seated Woman with Bare Breast* — elements which by their violent contrast give great energy to works whose very mildness might otherwise eliminate

Lunch in the Clearing, c. 1857
Monotype Grassi Collection, Modern Art Gallery, Milan

or dissolve them. So Corot fights fiercely against dissolution, also with the weapons of his very cerebral arrangements and severe constructions, as illustrated, when one analyses it, by *Chartres Cathedral*, particularly because of the mound and the trough in the foreground, and because of the cathedral itself, with its towers of different heights making its façade look like a group of rectangular trapezes. The same geometrical form with different dimensions and arrangements (like an air and variations, as Corot himself suggested when writing of his favourite composers) can be seen in the arm supporting the model's head in the *Interrupted Reading*, and again in other parts of the same picture, combined with

right-angle triangles. One could easily find quantities of examples of these subtle and virile mechanics, which give solid reinforcement to all his pictures, refuting the idea of dissolution. Besides being conscious of a certain necessity for technical order, what mental force enabled him to resist dissolution so bravely?

I was not thinking of Freud finding an awe-inspiring vulture among the robes of the group of the Virgin with St. Anne by Leonardo when I noticed that in the *Dreaming Gipsy Girl*, above the white quarter-circle, therefore in the region of her thorax, there was a golden shape which looked like both a capital D reversed and slanted, and a yellow eye. Discovering the eye made me see an open, threatening mouth lower down, at the join of her blouse and skirt, and soon to fit these features I found the profile of a monstrous, noseless head, the same which can be seen in the *Interrupted Reading*, again with the mouth at the join of blouse and skirt, but this time with a red eye in the strands of the necklace. A similar head can be seen on the stomach of Agostina, which is covered with an embroidered material, but this head has two eyes and a huge nasal aperture. This monster can be found in the landscapes, as for instance in *The Dance of the Nymphs*, where the central tree and the bushes together form a huge open maw which might well threaten these mythological creatures.

If we think in terms of unachieved actions and of Corot unconsciously projecting the portrait of his mother in nature as in his female models, the once famous couturière will be seen in a strange light. In fact this should not surprise one, for once Corot had substituted his mother for his father, she was invested with paternal authority, with all the dragon-raising fears which such pressure implies in the inner being of those who undergo it.

In other words, having identified his mother with Nature and endowed her with authority, he had to submit himself humbly to the tyrannical menace of nature itself. Such was the advice of this son, who at the instigation of La Fontaine was paradoxically dubbed ' father ' and accepted the nickname as though in delayed revenge, to his pupil Berthe Morisot, as Paul Valéry has recounted: " Do not let us think too much about Papa Corot; it is better to consult nature. " His respect and even fearful reverence for nature often led this contemporary of Nicéphore Niepce towards an almost photographic image, a characteristic which Elie Faure pointed out, and which he shares with the ' photographer ' painters who to-day use photography as a means of restoring contact between art and the everyday world. This obedience and submission to nature as to a wonderful, domineering and feared mother — besides the monsters already mentioned, look at *Le Coup de vent* (*The Gust of Wind*, p. 62) — made him check the process of dissolution with which other tendencies in his character were threatening her. Even when introducing into his chiaroscuro pictures such dissolving principles that René Huyghe said " after forms, matter is the next to dissolve ", he chose moments of transition and metamorphosis, like dusk or spring, thanks to which the sacrilegious act of annihilating the mother-goddess can be accomplished under cover of verisimilitude and half-light. That is to assume that it is in fact accomplished. " Let the mist rise ", said Corot. The mist rises and one sees that the Mother has not allow-

In the Wood at Civita Castellana Black-Lead Drawing and Pen on Cream Paper Louvre Museum, Paris

Study of Trees Pencil Drawing and Pen Private Collection, Paris

ed herself to be destroyed. She has overridden her son's will with all the power of the authority he gave her, and prevented him from renouncing for ever those severe contructions, those abstract, powerful yet subservient structures, which though sometimes veiled by morning mists and nebulous twilights, nonetheless give to landscape and figure an incorruptible bone-structure. Perhaps it is to this bone-structure or architecture, and to its relationship with the other elements in the picture, that one can attribute the penetrating impression which makes, in Germain Bazin's felicitous phrase, so many of Corot's pictures ' morsels of eternity '.

THE ROAD OF SIN-LE-NOBLE, NEAR DOUAI, 1873 Canvas Louvre Museum, Paris

BIOGRAPHY

On 16 July, 1796, a male child was born to a fashionable dress-maker and her draper husband, and christened Jean-Baptiste Camille. His birth came sixteen years after that of Ingres, but two years before Delacroix. All the landscape-painters who preceded the impressionists were younger than him: Diaz by twelve years, Troyon by fourteen, Dupré by fifteen, Théodore Rousseau by sixteen, Millet by eighteen and Daubigny by 21. He was 34 years older than the oldest of the impressionists, Pissarro, and nearly half a century older than Cézanne, who was born 47 years after him. Though Baudelaire wrote of him in 1845: " He is the head of the modern school of landscape painting ", he was in fact the oldest of the French landscapists of the nineteenth century.

Corot received his secondary education at Rouen between 1807 and 1812 and then at Poissy from 1813 to 1814. In 1815, while Napoleon was being beaten at Waterloo, Corot, who dreamed of being a painter, was beaten by his father, who made him an apprentice draper. As a little revenge, in 1817 he set up a studio in the country house which his parents had bought at Ville d'Avray. Four years later he did gain a decisive victory, when his father made him an allowance of 1,500 livres, a sum which had become available through the death of one of his sisters.

With the freedom this income gave him he began his career of landscapist and traveller at the age of 29 by leaving for Italy, which he visited three times, from 1825-28 and in 1834 and 1843. He frequently went to Switzerland (his mother was of Swiss origin) between 1852 and 1863. In 1854 he visited Belgium and Holland. In the winter he worked in his Paris studio, inspired by the canvases he had executed from nature during the mild seasons, which he spent travelling through the provinces of France — Normandy, Auvergne, Limousin, Brittany, Morvan, Burgundy, Northern France, the Jura, Savoy, the Dauphiny, Sologne, Saintonge, etc. Certain places and towns are repeated like recurrent themes in the history of his travels — Arras, Fontainebleau, Mantes, Douai, Rouen, Beauvais, Rosny, Marcoussis and of course Ville d'Avray, where together with his sister he inherited the family property.

One must also mention Auvers-sur-Oise (1858 and 1868) where, 32 years after Corot's last visit, Van Gogh, unknown to lovers of painting, killed himself at the age of 37. Even though Corot at the same age received a medal from the Salon (in 1833), he was hardly further advanced in his public career. Other canvases submitted by him to the same salon had been refused, the critics shunned him and the public knew nothing of him. It is only seven years later (in 1840) that he sold his first important painting to a private person. In 1846, after benefitting from several official purchases in 1840, '42 and '45, he was awarded the Legion of Honour (at the age of 50), and in 1847 Delacroix wrote in his diary after a visit to Corot: " Corot is a true artist ". He did not attain real glory, however, until he was nearly 60. At the international exhibition of 1855 Napoleon III bought his *Souvenir de Marcoussis* and Pissarro, representing the younger generation, came to ask him for advice. In 1862, Berthe Morisot became his pupil.

At the age of 66 he met Courbet. " I am the greatest painter alive " declared the master of Ornans, adding after a short silence " together with you, of course ". In reporting this incident Corot remarked: " If I had not been there, he would have forgotten me ". In 1874, at the age of 78, Corot had not been forgotten, for the Salon considered awarding him its medal of honour, yet withdrew it at the last moment. His paintings were so sought after however that false Corots proliferated, so that it was said: " Corot has painted 3,000 pictures, of which 10,000 are in America ". He himself authenticated a number of forgeries by signing them, out of pity for the forgers' poverty. Another example of his proverbial goodness was that when Daumier was threatened with expulsion from his house, because he could not pay the rent, Corot bought the house and gave it to him. " In this way ", he wrote to Daumier, " you will not have to be afraid of being turned out. "

On 22nd February, 1875, he died at the age of 79, a man whose funeral procession was followed by an enormous crowd and who a few days before his death was dreaming of landscapes and pink skies, of which Van Gogh was to say " It is we who paint them to-day ". Corot died partially unknown, however, because that part of his work dedicated to figure-painting was still undiscovered, and only publicly exhibited in 1909 (at the Salon d'Automne, where the cubists greatly admired them), to prove that this landscapist was capable of doing superb honour to the human form, even though he did it in secret.

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